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ABSTRACT

Noting that each individual chooses his own way of making sense, this collection of essays by Australian educators focuses on helping adult learners in literacy programs increase their self-confidence. The essays share a common idea--that the most significant points of departure for learning are students' own messages--their past experiences, present capacities, and views of the world. Following an introduction by the editor, the articles and their authors are as follows: (1) "Doing It Outselves" (Patricia Murphy); (2) "Composing Meaning or 'Football Ain't Just Football'" (Margie Leys); (3) "Aborigines in Gaol" (Ralph Foulds); (4) "Reading Inside" (Roslin Brennan); (5) "Reading: The Role of the Trade Teacher" (Robert Mealyea); (6) "'Teach Me To Spell': A Dilemma" (Pamela Osmond); and (7) "Fear, Resistance and Change in Adult Literacy Learners" (Audrey Grant). (ARH)

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MAKING MESSAGES MAKING MEANING

Significant Experiences for Older Writers and Readers

Edited by Mark Brennan

Australian Reading Association

ED291064

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Introduction

> When people scribble on the toilet wall, jot down notes for a speech, doodle, paint a picture or carve a tattoo, they are making messages. The messages they make vary according to their skills, their motives, their knowledge, their experience and their imagination. In making these messages they will draw upon a range of ideas, images and feelings old and new, as they expand and focus on their tasks. New messages will appear and grow, and old ones disappear as the writer follows through on the enterprise of message making.[1]

Each individual chooses the form of message making which suits him: his own way of making sense. The letter writer who decides to fill the centre of the page with an extremely detailed pen and ink drawing is opting for the mixture of message forms which utilise his skills and also allow him to work within a previously unfamiliar context — that of a letter. The individual who decides to take one idea or topic and research it, read about it and write about it is expanding his knowledge. The individual who chooses one idea from a plethora of ideas, explores it and delves into it, is using his message-making skills of introspection and self-exploration.

It is well established that in the business of learning everyone develops what he or she knows. We move from what we know to what we previously did not know. Any activity which is expected to contribute to a learner's development must be based on an appreciation and acceptance of that learner's message-making capabilities and inclinations; not only the things he *can do* but also the things he *could achieve*. Reading and writing are the most accessible media through which to explore these possibilities.

One of the big problems in helping students to become literate in this way lies in convincing them that their messages — their past experiences, present capacities and ever-changing views of the world are the most significant points of departure

[1] M. Brennan & R. E. Brennan, *Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor: A Report to the Australian Institute of Criminology on the Literacy Needs and Abilities of Prison Inmates*, RMIHE, Wagga Wagga, 1984.

Other extracts from the report appear throughout this publication.

for learning anything new. Many teachers and tutors in adult classes know the drama of the student realising that the skills which he already has can be used to further extend his thinking and learning, writing and reading.

'You mean you know what I'm saying!'
'They replied to my letter — they were interested in what I said.'
'These are just some of my words put together the way I see it . . . s'pose you'd call it poetry.'

When writing a piece that says 'just anything' we, as teachers, should be looking for ways to help the student go just a little further so that he says 'something', something to which he can attach reality and feeling. To do this he must take himself seriously. He must respect himself. And he must have the confidence and esteem as well as the skill to produce something real.

Making sense of anything is sometimes difficult, many times sporadic, and always cumulative. Written language invites and allows an engagement which extends the reader/writer and permits him to travel at his own speed, and leaves intact the record for another time. Making sense either of what we read or what we write is more than anything else a stance . . . supported or compromised by a variety of skills, conventions, and forms.

This collection of articles explores a range of relationships between the reader, the writer and the literature: prisoners and letters, students and text books, readers and newspapers — people and themselves.

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Patricia Murphy works now as a resource teacher in an ACT high school.

Margie Leys has recently returned to Australia from Illinois, where she worked at the Centre for the Study of Reading. Her previous work with high school students has made her especially aware of the transitional status of young adults bridging the worlds of school and non-school.

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Roslin Brennan is presently attached as a special service teacher to Carrol College, an alternative, work experience-based college for school leavers. She works also as a resource teacher in a small primary school, adding this to her previously held positions of researcher, tutor and classroom teacher.

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An earlier project, done in conjunction with Helen Gribble, focused on life-story case studies of adult literacy students.

Doing It Ourselves

Patricia Murphy

Each Monday night for four months I worked at the ACT College of TAFE with a Vietnamese woman called Jade. She had a degree in Maths but her English was not adequate to match her general ability and ambition. Differing radically from her previous teachers in the Remedial English course, I focused on writing as a way to develop all the skills she needed. To Jade, it was a real act of faith to abandon for a while the Thesaurus, let go the English grammar texts and test the experience of learning to write by writing.

The success, in terms of her enthusiastic response and the development of her writing and confidence, encouraged me greatly.

When I was asked in June to take over a group of six adults, I decided to apply the same principles to that group.

The group

Michael is 24 and, at school, was labelled a slow learner. He is now a storeman.

Karin is in her early 40s, a German migrant of ten years. She works as an aide at a pre-school kindergarten.

Katrina and Melissa are 16.

Ray works in a shoe store. He was referred to the group from a Real Estate course, because he could not manage the writing tasks.

Helen is in her late 40s. She is Katrina's mother and hopes to pass the Clerical Assistants' test to join the Public Service.

Joe came to Australia when he was three. His parents are Greek. He is a bricklayer. At TAFE he found the writing and note-taking requirements of the Building Certificate course too difficult.

The group's previous experience at TAFE

What help the students needed was decided completely by their teacher. Discussion of their own goals or preferences was not opened up. Even words to be learnt for spelling were selected by the teacher.

All students said they found it tedious and boring, but kept going because they were anxious to do anything that might

help. The two-hour class was punctuated with a 20-minute canteen break to which everyone looked forward.

Students were sometimes asked to read aloud. One student found this so humiliating that he stopped coming and only turned up by chance after I had taken over the class.

My aims for the group

I wanted to change their attitude to learning — to each other and to the teacher. I wanted to give them tools to help themselves and I set about working toward these aims in the first session. I believed they had a right and I a responsibility to make the time valuable.

I asked each person his or her particular reasons for coming and where help was most wanted. While everyone — especially Michael — emphasised spelling, they all said in different ways that they could 'talk but just can't write'. While Karin wanted to write for personal fulfilment only, the others saw writing as a way to better jobs.

I told the group that I believed the best way to improve writing was to spend some time learning about it and more time actually writing. I emphasised that I would be working with them individually. We compared our goals and it was happily agreed that we were not all at the same place and that individual help would be most appropriate to such a group.

I asked them if they thought their spelling had been improving. They responded that they had spent time at TAFE on spelling, but that it was particular words at work which most bothered them. 'My boss tells me to write something down and I can't spell half the words. He thinks I'm an idiot.'

I suggested to them the idea of a personal dictionary. You write in corrections of your own spelling errors, and practise writing them. The emphasis is on learning words you need to use.

Starting writing — a formal beginning

Because of the special need of this class to be in control and confident, I decided to explain some aspects of the writing process to them. I wanted them to be clear on my aims for each activity, as I was now clear about their needs.

First of all, I explained what most people actually do when they write. They collect ideas, make connections, draft a piece of writing, read it, select what they like and begin again . . .

collecting and connecting. We went through this process ourselves.

I chose to guide the activity quite formally to begin with. There were two good reasons. The first was that these people were most unused to writing anything and all had very strong black and white expectations about their efforts. It would be right or wrong . . . and probably wrong. Just making a list of words and phrases about the topics with which they felt comfortable would ensure success for each person. The second reason was that I had to win their confidence in me and in this way of doing things. Unlike Jade, they did not have lots of academic and job success to fall back on. Not enough confidence to risk failing. They had a lot to lose if they failed at 'Special English'. I was asking them to put a great deal of trust in me: to abandon their spelling games and grammar texts and try something new. A measure of structure and formality was comfortable as they coped with the newness of the class.

In the first session, we listed together everything we knew about Elvis Presley. We had fun doing it. We then tried to connect and group some of these points. Most of us got three groups, a couple four. We then tried to work out how we could label each group. We got headings like 'his childhood', 'his physical appearance', 'his career', 'his problems'. We then wrote a first draft about Elvis. They used each connected group of points as a basis for a paragraph.

Joe, Katrina, Ray and Karin were very enthusiastic about this. It gave them a way of avoiding getting lost and muddled. Joe commented that he realised now that he could use a strategy like that to organise information in his building certificate class.

It also demonstrated, through the different way each person organised the groups of ideas, that there are many reasonable ways to write about something.

Writing requires an audience worthy of the effort. Sometimes the audience is simply the writer herself or the writing itself. The writing is done to clarify the writer's own feelings and thoughts and sometimes the writing itself is its own end. Most writers write for themselves in the first instance and if a further external audience is required then they look around for such. Other writers write for a market and of course the psychological stance required of and for this kind of activity is different.

The situation remains however that writing seeks a response worthy of its effort.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.229.

'I suppose I just think I could put myself across in a different way.

'I feel that I could say things differently and more clearly . . . what's inside me. And I can't . . . and I feel like a blank.'

Another man expressed a concern with his writing. He said that he had a problem: '. . . putting what I'm thinking down into words, instead of just making it sound mechanical sort of . . . it just doesn't have the feeling that I want in the words.'

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.29.

Composing Meaning *or* 'Football Ain't Just Football'

Margie Leys

While skimming through the local newspaper one Monday evening, I came across this headline:

RECORDS FALL
AS CANADA
COPS HIDING

I couldn't remember hearing or reading anything about Canadian policemen in hiding, nor could I imagine what kinds of records they could be breaking.

My curiosity aroused, I read on to the opening sentence:

> SYDNEY — Grand Slam Champions Australia ran in a record-equalling nine tries in a 59-3 demolition of Canada in the inaugural Dunhill rugby union Test at the Sydney cricket ground on Saturday.

'Oh,' I muttered, 'it's only football.'

I'm not particularly fond of football and I didn't read the rest of the article. But I have spent years studying and teaching reading and I am curious as to why comprehension problems occur. I showed the headline to my husband. He read it and immediately said, 'Union . . . last Saturday's match . . . we destroyed them.'

I decided to re-examine both my thinking and the headline. First I noticed the absence of any obvious football words. Next, I realised I had inappropriate notions about the key words 'cops' and 'hiding'. In my American version of English, 'cops' generally refers to policemen. And 'hiding' generally refers to something being concealed. I looked again at the story. It was on page 4, a general news page, with an advertisement — definitely not part of the sports section. To make sense out of the headline, I had to start reading the article. The words 'Grand Slam Champions' helped me guess that the article would be about some type of sport and the word 'tries' helped me to narrow it down to some type of football.

The telegraphic nature of headlines often makes them ambiguous and it is not unusual for someone to start reading an

article before it is clear what the headline means. But why did my husband understand immediately? Why did his sense fit better than mine? I would suggest that there are at least three things that helped him. First, he has an avid interest in sports and had actually watched the match. Reading the word 'Canada' brought associations to him of the Canadian Rugby team currently in Australia, not of the country in general. Second, he speaks a version of English — Australian — where 'cops' is often used as a verb (and has nothing to do with police) and 'hiding' can mean a particularly bad defeat. Third, he reads the local Monday paper, eagerly looking for articles about weekend sporting matches. He commented that in country newspapers, international and national sport is often reported in the general news rather than the sports section. Both of us used knowledge of the world, knowledge of particular words, and knowledge about the way newspapers are organised to help us make sense of the headline we read. The knowledge my husband selected was appropriate; mine was not. But as a competent reader, I recognised that I was having problems understanding the text, and I had a strategy to continue reading to help me make sense of it.

The above incident serves to illustrate a fact about the reading process: comprehension is an act of constructing meaning. This view requires the reader to be an active participant, making sense of a text based not only on the ink marks on the page but also on the reader's knowledge of the world, of the words in the text, and of previous encounters with similar texts, authors, styles and formats. This is a quite different perspective from the diagram I remember seeing in my undergraduate reading-methods text, in which 'reading' and 'listening' were labelled as receptive skills and 'writing' and 'speaking' as expressive skills. The word 'receptive' implies passivity — a reader receiving a message from the author. But reading viewed as an active process requires that a negotiation of meaning takes place between an author and a reader through the medium of a text.

A useful metaphor for this perspective, suggested by David Pearson and Robert Tierney [1], is to think of a reader as writing or composing an inner text as she reads an author's text. The

[1] P. David Pearson and Robert J. Tierney, 'On Becoming a Thoughtful Reader: Learning to Read like a Writer', in A. C. Purvis & O. Niles (eds), *Becoming Readers in a Complex Society*, 83rd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

reader's text thus composed is never identical to the author's text, due to the unique backgrounds and context from which the reader reads and from which the author writes. But the texts are parallel and closely related. The construction of this inner, or parallel, text is not an end in itself; rather is it a means to an end, comprehension.

The constructed text is what a reader comprehends and on which she bases her comments. The closer the match of the parallel text to the author's text, the greater the reader's understanding. A word of caution here, though: a text does not have only one, absolute meaning — even to the author, its creator. Kenneth Goodman has stated:

> Great literary works have a depth which makes it possible to understand them, to construct them, at many levels. A story has it that once, when Robert Frost was being introduced to an audience of college students, his host went on in great detail about the marvellous references in his favourite Frost poem. Proud of his brilliant insight, he turned to the poet and said, 'Isn't that so, Mr Frost?' to which the poet replied, 'Then again it may just be about apple picking'.[2]

But we should also bear in mind Pearson and Tierney's observation that 'most writers are vain enough to expect readers to create a meaning that bears some resemblance to the meaning they had in mind when they wrote the text'.[3]

If we think of reading as an event where a reader acts as a composer, we can use a model of the writing process as a basis for discussing the processes in which a competent reader engages. A model with popular currency in Australia suggests that writers plan, draft and revise their compositions and that this process is recursive. Also, depending on the particular composition, a writer may spend more or less time on any one of these activities.

When a reader plans her reading of a text, she may set goals or purposes for her reading, activate her current state of knowledge about the topic, predict what the author will say, or ask herself questions about the topic or her task. In the example of my reading the newspaper, I did a minimal amount of

[2] Kenneth S. Goodman, 'Unity in Reading', in A. C. Purvis & O. Niles (eds), *Becoming Readers in a Complex Society*, 83rd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

[3] Pearson and Tierney, op. cit.

planning. My goal was to skim through the paper and find articles that appeared interesting to read. It was a cold winter's night. I was sitting in front of a roaring fire. And this was a time when I was using reading as a leisure activity. But if I were preparing to read a chapter of a statistics book in order to complete an assignment, my planning would have been quite different.

When a reader drafts or composes her inner text, she uses the author's text as a blueprint — a plan from which she can construct a meaning for that text. She uses this in concert with the prior knowledge she brings to the reading situation. The impetus here is the reader's search for coherence. Competent readers expect texts to make sense. When they do not, it may be necessary for the reader to do a number of things, such as make inferences about what the author did not tell her, revise her model of the text in light of subsequent information, or even ignore information that does not fit with her model of the text. As I drafted an inner text for the newspaper headline, I came up with a model that did not quite make sense to me, so I continued reading. This led me to another activity, revision of my inner text.

When a reader constructs an inner text, she may engage in revision strategies ranging from fine tuning a developing interpretation to large-scale alterations, such as realising that the gardener was the killer, not the butler! Good writers spend time reflecting on their text. They revise and make alterations where necessary. Thoughtful readers engage in similar activities. They reflect, re-read, and change their predictions based on new information. Overall, they view their inner text as draft-like in quality and subject to revision. An example of a large-scale revision is my change from thinking I would be reading about Canadian policemen in hiding to realising that I would be reading about a football match. This occurred after I had read additional text and reflected on the new information.

A reader or a writer has several things to juggle while reading or writing. She needs to balance a variety of activities while keeping the whole process moving towards an end: comprehension of the text. During the composing of some texts there may be a great deal of planning and virtually no revising. With other texts, this situation could be reversed. One characteristic of a good reader is her flexibility; she is able to switch activities when it is necessary.

What are the implications for instruction if you view reading as an act of composing? I think there are two main things

teachers need to do. One is to provide time — time to reflect, re-read, and simply mull. Surveys of high school students' study habits have shown that they spend very little time thinking about or considering topics before, during or after reading. Nor do they tend to re-read or reflect upon a text. The most common reading strategy reported was to read a text once and underline 'important sections'. So providing only time is not enough, it seems, to have our readers read like writers.

The second thing we need to do is provide students with opportunities to learn how to read like a writer. For example, we can think out loud as we read a passage for our students so that they can see how a good reader plans, drafts, and revises his inner text. We can create assignments where students re-read, reflect upon and talk about their developing interpretation of a text. Ann Berthoff[4] suggests having students write in a double-entry notebook as a strategy for developing critical reading. On the left side she has students write notes from their reading. On the right side she has students write notes from their reading. They record quotations, lists, images — verbal and visual — and observations. On the left side they write about their notes. Summaries, formulations, revisions and editorial suggestions are a sample of appropriate entries. The reason for this double-entry format is that it gives students a way to conduct a continuing audit of meaning. A kind of critical monitoring, if you like.

We need also to encourage students to question as they read. To ask themselves questions like 'What have I learned about volcanoes from reading this text?' 'What do I think will happen next?' 'Why did the author include that information? It doesn't fit with what he has already told me.' 'How would the meaning of this poem change if a word or a line were altered?' 'How have my experiences with death affected my interpretation of this story?'

It is important also to allow students to talk with each other throughout their reading. As adults, we often discuss journal articles, newspaper articles, novels or technical writing with our peers. We read what a critic or reviewer has to say about a book. Some of us join book clubs, and read and discuss works within a community of readers. Why not encourage this same questioning, collaborative atmosphere within our student groups? We want to encourage our students to integrate what is

[4] Ann E. Berthoff, 'A Curious Triangle and the Double-entry Notebook: Or How Theory Can Help Us Teach Reading and Writing', in *The Making of Meaning*, Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., Upper Montclari, 1981.

in a text with what they already know, not just to memorise what someone else has to say about a subject.

If you already have a process-writing curriculum under way, you have an excellent opportunity to draw parallels between the two processes. Your students have a head start on learning to read like a writer. They are accustomed to planning, drafting, revising and conferencing about a text.

If process writing is not part of your curriculum, this is an excellent opportunity to introduce it. Reading and writing are related processes; both are concerned with the construction of meaningful texts. For too long, in too many classrooms, they have been taught as unrelated subjects — or, worse, as subjects in themselves with little or no reference to content or actual substance.

Learning to read like a writer requires time and opportunity to re-read, reflect, question, work with confusion and uncertainties, and to discuss interpretations of text with other readers. The suggestions here form the first step to thinking about ways to introduce students to the notion of reading as a constructive process, as a communication through text between a reader and an author. Students can be guided to question their texts and their own understanding, rather than just to try to memorise and regurgitate the content.

' "Yeah I'll do it for you." But I thought about it. I'm a lucky bloke. He can't even write to his girl-friend without getting someone else to do it . . . see he was telling me things that I really didn't want to know . . . and they were private things . . . But he used to tell me what to write and I used to write and I'd try not to think about it.' This man understood the loneliness of illiteracy and offered some partial relief from it. 'And so it must be really hard, because what else has a bloke got to do. If he's in his cell and he can't read and write then he's got a bad situation. 'Cause all he can think about is being locked up.'

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.30

One self-assessed poor reader explained that his low standard of literacy was due to violence at home during his early school life. 'I used to go to sleep in the class all the time. I had a bit of trouble from me old man . . . used to keep us up all night . . . I was just dog tired so I went to sleep . . . I went through Grade 3, Grade 4 and Grade 5 and Grade 6, all through, just sleeping . . . the only thing I remember is going to school and going to sleep . . . he used to give us a hiding every night, he used to come home drunk . . . so you used to have to stay awake and that, to know that you weren't going to get a hiding that night.'

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.31

Aborigines In Gaol: An Approach to Meeting a Literacy Need

Ralph Foulds

Like other Australians who have strong family and community ties, Aborigines have one overriding need when they come to gaol — to communicate with their people outside. However, relatives and friends may feel uncomfortable visiting the gaol or may find it difficult to travel from remote 'homeland' areas. Aboriginal inmates, therefore, have a great incentive to improve their reading and writing skills so that they can send and receive letters.

Unfortunately, literacy programs in gaols rarely appeal to Aborigines, and this seems to be particularly the case with those from tradition-oriented communities. These inmates may attend one or two classes, but rarely persist with their studies.

Many of the general learning problems experienced by Aborigines in school may be attributed to cultural differences,[1] and literacy programs in gaols have rarely managed to accommodate them. According to Harris,[2] Aborigines learn best if instruction is person-orientated, informal and geared to context-specific skills. Further, Aborigines, like other adults, seem to respond best to functional approaches to learning.

The adaptation of instruction in line with these considerations is not often straightforward, and the provision of appropriate reading material is no exception. Aboriginal inmates do not appear to relate to the standard fare of literacy programs and many show little interest in books generally — even those featuring Aborigines.

However, perusal of Aboriginal correspondence shows that consistent but different conventions of writing are often used, compared with those of the majority culture. For example, there is typically a repetitious incorporation of a few Aboriginal words, such as 'Anah' ('Do you understand?' or 'Is that correct?'). Aborigines may well see standard English texts as

[1] F. H. Watts, *Aboriginal Futures: A Review of Research and Developments and Related Policies in the Education of Aborigines. A Summary*. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1982.

[2] S. Harris, 'Aboriginal Learning Styles and the Teaching of Reading', in J. Sherwood (ed.), *Aboriginal Education Issues and Innovations*, Creative Research, Perth, 1982.

alien, and not related to their needs.

One approach to the teaching of literacy used by the present writer, which takes cognisance of these conditions, is based on the use of letters written and received by Aborigines as the primary reading material. These letters are arranged in book form and organised where possible to provide continuity.

While the concept of a letter-based reader may seem strange in terms of Western individualism, it is not at all at odds with Aboriginal cultural traditions. Rather, such sharing is highly congruent with Aboriginal collectivism and social orientation to learning. A letter written to any Aboriginal in the program is viewed as group property and, indeed, incoming mail is often intended for the Aboriginal gaol community rather than for a particular individual. Most importantly, the letter collection commands a great deal of interest. Some letters are memorised through repeated readings.

Lessons begin with a reading of the collection, starting with the oldest letters and proceeding to the latest. This is essentially a group activity, with everyone participating at least to the extent of listening to the reader and following the written words. Naturally, those with advanced skills tend to read the more recent letters, while less competent learners tackle the better-known texts.

The teacher's role is to assist with difficulties the group cannot handle and to stimulate discussion on such things as word meanings and the process of reading. However, roles are by no means sharply defined as those of teacher and pupil. Indeed, Aborigines like to explain some of their own writing conventions, and this contributes to the shared learning environment.

The advantages of the letter-based approach are considerable. In brief, the potential of the Shared Book Experience recommended for Aboriginal learners by Harris[3] can be realised. The use in particular of familiar texts enables beginners to approximate the end product of reading. Instruction is functional, attuned to preferred language use and socially orientated.

The later parts of a lesson typically involve writing letters and, again, this is very much a group effort. Naturally the level of individual participation varies, but with the use of the letter-book as a resource for words and ideas, every learner can join in. Peer teaching is the norm here, with the teacher acting as

[3] ibid., p.149.

adviser in making suggestions about such things as word usage and spelling, but functioning as a member of the group.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the letter-based approach is that, once started, it is self-perpetuating. Aborigines in gaol have a great need to communicate with their people outside and this approach taps this need and stimulates the flow of correspondence, which not only ensures the provision of new reading material, but is a tangible and positive pay-off for Aborigines who participate in the program.

To use the letter profitably in prison is a personal challenge. It is the only controllable contact with the outside. It's the only way to project yourself into relationships that lie beyond the walls. They contain everything that is precious to a prisoner's humanity and must be seen as the essence of the literate enterprise. Letters are the basic literature of prison. People listen for the mail call and can spend up to a whole day or longer agonising over replies. If a prisoner cannot write and there is no one who will scribe for him this whole area of communication is closed to him. The inability to write has cut off the individual from one source of contact with people on the outside, and in his mind prison is regarded differently from those who write and receive letters regularly.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.228.

Making messages is essentially a human activity and if human beings are prevented from making messages publicly, demonstrably and openly then they will seek more private and specialised ways of saying their piece. Incarceration implies control and only allows those message making activities which are open to scrutiny and monitoring such as letter writing and painting, tangible and assessable and controllable activities. Underground newsletters, secret languages, graffiti, tattooing — on first the outside and then the inside of the body — are all symptoms and examples of the need to make messages in a hostile environment which must, by definition, positively discourage instances of individual, non-controllable self expression.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.226.

Reading Inside

Roslin Brennan

The law has judged that people who are sent to prison are those who have not demonstrated the proper sense of personal responsibility to those around them. They are those people who cannot operate within the community without damaging that community, its property, or its members.

Prisons withdraw from society those individuals who have proved to be unmanageable. Punishment is withdrawal — withdrawal from contact with the outside world until the price has been paid. Punishment also means obeying the laws of the prison hierarchy, built up over many years — eating when told to, working when told to, sleeping when told to, and being locked in your cell for a specified number of hours each night. Monitoring is constant, and surveillance keen.

Physical movement, which most of us take for granted, is checked by gates and doors and endless sets of keys that rattle on officers' belts as they move. To move from the cell to the front gate may require protracted negotiations at each barrier. Every physical movement is noted, and the ever-present high walls and rolls of ribbon wire rebuff the individual's interest in even the weather 'out there'. Head-counting and a rigorous routine are tirelessly maintained.

If people are to be confined, then all of this is necessary. The idea and the reality of control is paramount. Personal responsibility yields to the momentum of the institution.

Socially irresponsible individuals are assigned to a prison which removes every trace of personal responsibility, replaces it with discipline and routine, and hopes that prisoners will come out of the tunnel better equipped to deal with the world in general. But withdrawal without the potential for change and growth only produces resentment and bitterness, and a profound sense of it all being a 'bit of a waste of time'.

Withdrawal via the prison system ultimately creates more problems than it solves. It temporarily removes problems from the public eye, but does little to solve those problems. It temporarily appeases and protects the community, but does little to engender an attitude of personal responsibility and control in the offender.

The problem is: How do you personally empower individuals

to regain control of their minds, and therefore their lives, in a context of complete physical regimentation and control? How can prison inmates, in this environment, come to terms with the precepts of personal and social responsibility?

Society at large prefers to forget its prisoners, except when they escape or are allowed out on 'educational leave'. As one inmate said: 'Sometimes I think the public feels that we were born here'. The 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality is one which is easily assumed by those who have never had to face the constrictions of imprisonment.

Changes do occur — physical conditions do improve. Prison and ancillary staff work hard with what they have, but the basic problem has not yet been addressed — the problem of how to return control of their own lives to those who are incarcerated.

Simple solutions are often dismissed, either because they do not appear sophisticated enough for the age of the silicon chip or because they require more human input and less of the 'systems management' approach to dealing with people. Answers are to be found within the individual, not imposed from the outside. Answers are an expression of individual initiative to do things differently, while the prison serves only to reinforce the status quo. The paradoxical context is created by ideas of individuality juxtaposed against a system which maintains, for reasons of management, that everyone must be and do the same things within the prison routine. Offering alternative options, offering control of their own lives within a context which preaches a gospel of total control and constant monitoring of actions, is a kind of subversion.

Those from whom all responsibility for their environment and actions has been taken cannot be taught to regain control of their own lives and actions by the imposition of outside discipline and work-oriented programs, which at best can be described as repetitive. Removal of individual liberty and personal responsibility is hardly the formula for the development of socially well-adjusted human beings.

Liberation in this context can only be found in the minds of those who are imprisoned. The only freedom is the freedom to think, to mull, to plan, to feel resentment, to harbour ill will, to read and to write. Learning is the only activity which is not subject to scrutiny and control, since it takes place within the mind of each individual learner. Reading and writing are private, free from outside manipulation and totally within the control of the individual.

Reading is the only activity, apart from watching television,

which can take an individual to another place or into another person's mind and body and heart, and can help that individual explore the parameters of what make other people tick.

Writing is the only activity which can allow the prisoner to commit his ideas and thoughts and feelings to paper, to be shared — or not shared — with others. It takes the prisoner beyond himself and beyond the walls of the crazy, unreal world in which he lives.

Prisons are dreary places. The majority are old and cold and insidiously colourless. They are clean and maintained meticulously by lots of busy hands with bins of smelly disinfectant. They are frequently repainted, and the layers of past years stare blandly at each other across carefully polished floors.

The architecture is stark, unfriendly and lacks even the flare of public-toilet graffiti. Print is kept to a minimum — a few well-used notice boards contain lists and regulations and demerits and 'attention volley ball players'. Public written expression is confined to a prison newspaper — provided that the inmates have one. The atmosphere is informationally anomic.

Slogans, signs and unofficial notes are painted out as soon as they appear, and the administrative rationale is quite clear. However, restrictions do not diminish the inclination to commit even your own name to print in some public form, and this inclination finds expression in more clandestine activities such as tattooing. This is similarly outlawed. The solution: tattoo those parts of your body which are not publicly visible — nostrils, gums, ear-lobes and genitals.

The compulsion to make your mark is exceptionally strong, however apparently anti-social and painful the process. Why? People carve their names into historic landmarks and trees, kids scratch their names into wooden desks and write obscenities on the inside covers of their exercise books, and people in multi-storey housing blocks in depressed areas defecate in the corridors. The thread is that these are forms of expression which record that they are people, and that in some way they are real and have at least the weapon of desecration in totally powerless situations.

A prisoner made the following comment about the value of writing in prison:

> I share (my writing) with other special people. Very seldom do I show it to many people. It's just usually special people. I keep the rest. I keep them and every so often I sit down and go over them again. Sometimes I sit down and think 'Crazy. How could I write

that?' And if I'm a bit flat, I sit down, and that's generally when I can put a poem together . . . when I'm a bit down. And then I read them later on and just laugh. But I can express myself better. You can go into a fantasy world which I think everyone has to do whether they're in here or outside, I think you need to close off from the real world every now and again, and I do that and I love it. And when I come back to reality, it's all right. I've become more aware of myself and others in this way. As far as I'm concerned, I'll go out a better person, and that pleases me.

Similarly, reading is a process of private personal interpretation.

You read something, you make your own characters, and make your own locations, and everything is totally believable.

Reading is also a liberator:

Reading is a sort of release from everything — you get into a book and things around you just disappear.

And reading is an educator:

I like reading because you learn about other cultures, other people, and it takes me away.

Another prisoner made the following comments about reading and writing:

I spent a lot of time in prison early on and in those days you had nothing. You had no TV or anything like that and I think it was lights out at 9.30 or 10 o'clock or something like that in those days. And you were locked up at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and you had tea at 3 o'clock in the afternoon — 16 to 18 hours in a cell — but in there, there was nothing to do. The radio was controlled by the staff, all political items were censored — they censored everything, even the newspapers — big chunks cut out of it. You know, a full *Age* you would end up with about four pages. There was no rationale behind it.

Their view was to keep us all incommunicado. We were in single cells — one to a yard. We were isolated in every way. When you were in the labour yards you had no radio, no newspaper, no contact with the outside world. No contact except with your visitor and in those days it was once every month. I think it was 20 minutes. It was hard to stop from going insane — a lot of blokes did go insane — a lot of fellows they used to keep on drugs. They used to feed them with pills and hit them with a needle when they got too bad. This was in the 60s. I was there from '65 to '74 I think.

Down there I read a hell of a lot. I would read a book a night.

You know 300 or 400 pages. In the end I could almost speed-read without realising that I was speed-reading. It was all you had. That and your own mind. You would do things in your own mind, like pulling a car engine to pieces or playing chess or something like that.

We were not allowed to write. You were only allowed to write a letter a week and receive one letter a fortnight. And the only writing you could do was on that letter. You couldn't write down what they were doing to you. It was all searches, strip searches you know — your cells were ripped apart to pieces every day. In and out of the yards. You couldn't keep anything. In fact you weren't allowed to carry a pencil or biro — it was classified as an offensive weapon. And you did your letters. They used to hand out biros with the letter, and you wrote the letter. And when you put the letter back, which had to be the next morning, the biro had to come back with it.

Books and magazines were all that were there. It was the only independent activity that I had. There were guys there who couldn't read, and they just sat there and twiddled their thumbs for 18 hours a night. That was about all they could do. Or get a magazine and look at the pictures. Not being able to read — you weren't missing anything. If you could read, you knew just what the damn joint was doing to you. Crushing you in where you were ready to just explode or whatever.

The more intelligent they were, the more they seemed to get into trouble. You can wreck a person more by playing with his mind than you ever will by hitting him with a baton. You will get over the bruises, but you can fuddle a man up, and he will never get over it.

The incidence of prison poetry is well known. Poetry seems to be the medium that people want to use because it expresses so accurately what they want to say. The words and ideas, rather than the grammar or the mechanisms of expression, are what make poetry different from prose and an attractive format for those with something to say.

It's your own thoughts put down, it's an achievement when you get something down that upsets you, or a feeling that you have, and you put it down on paper. It's a good feeling.

Prisoners read and write to transport themselves, and the necessity for intelligent and emotional release is different for each of them. Literacy is the only activity which allows for personal freedom in prison. They have discovered the value of it.

Growth is a process of realising what makes yourself the way you are and coming to terms with this. Reading and writing are

the media which make these facts obvious. Perhaps the simplicity of solutions is intolerable to those who think that problems can be solved by bigger and better facilities and services, rather than by individual personal treks through the morass of experiences which make up a person.

If the following situation is any indication, the compulsion to appear and to become literate is exceptionally strong in an environment which is totally antithetical to learning.

> When I was in one section — they called it the industry yard — there were about half a dozen of us in this one yard and this guy used to pick up the newspaper every day and sit over on this bench. He'd be over there for half an hour, going over the newspapers. And he'd sit down and have his smoko cuppa and he'd be back to work again. I used to say 'When you're finished!' 'Right O'kay'. I was there nine months before I found out that the bastard couldn't read. He couldn't read but he'd look at it every day. Every day he'd look at that damn newspaper.
>
> And then one day I said, 'Oh, what's that about? That bit about some headline. Read it out, will you?' I was doing something; I couldn't come. And he sort of just stared at the page and after a while I said 'What is it?' And I went over and sat down next to him. I said: 'That's interesting isn't it?' After I'd read it. And he said: 'What?' I said: 'That!' And he sort of put his head down and said: 'I can't bloody read'. I said: 'What?' 'Shut up, I don't want these dickheads to hear. I can't read.' I couldn't believe it. This little masquerade had been put on every day for months so that he could sit down and read that newspaper. He most probably saw people coming home on the train. They unfolded the newspaper and he's done exactly the same.

Institutionalisation was the reason given for the poor level of reading and writing. 'I got a brother who doesn't read and write very well. If he writes a letter to me it's quite obvious that he's seen me doing it. I used to do a Freelance Journalist course, and he used to see me reading out articles. I had a Thesaurus next to me.

'He's been institutionalised far beyond the call of what's right and wrong. He's that institutionalised now that they've given him the pension . . . Anyway he's in and out of gaol all the time . . . by his letters you can tell he's got the Thesaurus right next door to him, because all the words that he uses — they've got nothing to do with what he's saying.'

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.770

Having collated responses to the question 'What was the last book you read?' the following list emerged:

I Can Stop Anytime I Want To
Two Is Lonely
L-Shaped Room
Dibbs
Dawn
A Wife Like Danny — Champion of the World
Go Ask Alice
Joanie
Mystic Rose
Puberty Blues
Hitchhike

It is clear that the girls (Youth Training Centre detainees) were searching for, and finding, books with which they had a lot of personal identifications. All the books on the list deal with people in critical situations coming to terms with their crises in a variety of ways. The girls were definitely not reading to escape from their problems, but rather to find possible solutions to them.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.104

Reading: The Role of the Trade Teacher

Robert Mealyea

Introduction

TAFE in Victoria is developing a new curriculum approach for its vocational programs. The new design concept is currently fashionable among many trade subjects, including those associated with the plumbing, carpentry and electrical trades. It is a 'print-oriented' mode of learning in that the proponents presuppose understanding to flow from a self-paced arrangement of units of technical prose.

The units of reading are usually presented to the students prior to their actual observation or discussion of the trade task. Thus a basic assumption of this curriculum design concept is that the self-paced reading units are highly suited to impart trade-related theoretical knowledge to the apprentices.

Theory and practice divorced in TAFE

One of the central and enduring problems of education has been to blend the learning of theory and practice — how to accommodate the abstract and the practical, the reflective and the concrete. It remains both a curriculum design and a curriculum implementation problem. This is especially the case in TAFE, where so much emphasis is given to the teaching of theory and practice in trade-related subjects.

There was a time when trade skills were learned on the job, through a bonded relationship between master and apprentice. Skills acquisition was largely a product of practice. With the advent of trade schooling, a mode of apprentice training evolved which usually consisted of instructors demonstrating manipulative processes, using a 'how-to-do-it' monologue, including questioning, while groups of apprentices observed and listened, awaiting their turn at the same task. The craft was learnt in an atmosphere similar to that found on the job, with interaction between the instructor and the apprentice, and between apprentices. The emphasis was on craft, and the materials were manipulated in a visibly human way, leading to sound practical abilities in the students and some theoretical

understanding of their applications.

In this context, the teacher's language was embedded in his actions as the learning objectives were pursued. Thus, as the craft-related processes were manipulated and learned, the instructor's verbal language served to direct to the physical features of the craft, and functioned as one element in an act of awareness. Meaning emerged out of the process, and it is a measure of the power of the instructional context that the trade-specific terminology was unconsciously mastered by the observing and participating students. Furthermore, mastery of the trade language was a consequent 'by-product' of the shared activity, and not the central purpose. Generally speaking, and depending on the teacher, the students were encouraged to be reflective. Certainly they were active. There was little artificial division between practising and thinking.

The mode of apprentice training has now altered. The learning context has changed to include predominantly the use of reading. Currently TAFE trade training is largely theory-based, where learning is divorced from practice: it is no longer at the 'point of doing'. To the extent that they once existed, broad educational goals in apprentice training have given way to specific, trade-oriented behavioural objectives. Curriculum developers, using a survey methodology directed at relevant employers, claim to be able to analyse all the skills that a tradesperson needs. These are then 'broken down' into theoretical and practical behavioural objectives, sometimes totalling fifty units of work for an apprentice to complete over a period of three years' trade schooling.

This mode of training segments theory and practice and alters the nature of skills acquisition by making the content instrumental and decontextualised. Previously, the general characteristics of trade education were a balance between mental and manual labour, group interaction, and an orientation to practice where, for example, the theoretical principles of heat and the fusion of metal were learned through the practical experience of actually welding a project. Thus, a learned commitment to apply both theoretical and practical knowledge was available, to be brought to bear whenever a new situation arose. With the new approach, however, such a tandem relationship between theory and practice no longer exists.

The curriculum materials developed through the Instructional Systems Model of vocational education curriculum development are increasingly presented in an abstract mode. This break between the abstract and the practical can be labelled as

a form of apartheid. From this viewpoint, Hammerston argues that ' . . .apprentices have a lower threshold of tolerance of technical vocabulary once it is divorced from practical action'.[1] More disturbingly, it is arguable that the tendency to separate theory and practice is not confined to the case of the ISM. As Olson notes:

> Whether for reasons of effectiveness or of economy, educators have settled for learning out of context through means that are primarily symbolic . . . That is, schooling involves the acquisition of knowledge that possesses at least two distinctive properties: (a) that knowledge is divorced from practical action, and (b) that knowledge is representative of linguistic symptoms.[2]

However, this paper is not arguing primarily against intellectual endeavour, but is concerned with the break between practice and theory, where an intimate and reciprocal connection should be evident. Apprentice education does require a certain amount of abstract thought, but it is at its most effective when conjoined with doing. Even when related to a common underlying structure of knowledge, learning, if presented in an abstract fashion through reading alone, demands skills different from those needed for learning through experience.

Apprentice literacy

It is common for many apprentices to experience reading problems during the course of their training. This leads to very strong feelings among trade teachers in TAFE colleges (and those in teacher training) that apprentices with reading and learning difficulties have been 'let down' by their previous teachers, in primary and secondary schools.

An even stronger feeling often expressed by trade teachers is that if an apprentice is having trouble with the reading demands of his course, it is the humanities and compensatory education teachers who should be responsible for helping him. However, the prestigious Bullock report, *A Language for Life*[3], recommended a minimum of 150 hours' instruction in literacy development for all teachers in training. Until recently, trade teachers received no instruction at all in this important area.

[1] M. Hammerston, *On Becoming a Plumber*, Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of London, 1981.
[2] D. R. Olson, 'The Language of Instruction: The Literate Bias of Schooling', in R. C. Anderson et al. (eds), *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.
[3] *A Language for Life — The Bullock Report*, HMSO, London, 1975.

An understanding of the reading process is of vital concern to trade teachers. The trade school work demanded by an apprentice requires that he or she be able to read, with full comprehension, the subject matter of the course. Trade courses are becoming increasingly 'print-dominated', and this reliance on reading is causing problems.

With the introduction of the Instructional Systems Approach for vocational education in the 1980s, an even greater need exists for students to be competent and independent readers. In the former modular type of apprentice training, apprentices were able to copy information from a technical manual into the blank spaces provided in the module, without any understanding of what they had just 'read'. Things are now changing. With the systems approach to training, the apprentice must fully comprehend the reading material in order to carry out successfully the behavioural objectives; a demonstration of comprehension must be shown by applying the new knowledge to the correct completion of a task. This is an integral part of the new method of training. If the apprentice has not understood what it is that he or she has just read, the consequences will be obvious: demonstration of mastery of the topic will not occur. The apprentice may be deemed 'in need of help'. Once so identified, the 'cure' still most frequently proposed is somehow or other to provide the 'basics' in reading which it is considered the apprentice missed out on. But can this view be supported?

A great deal of research from around the world, and our own research experiences in Victoria, shows that apprentices with reading problems do not require 'back-to-basics' teaching at all. What they may need, as this paper sets out to examine, is some prior knowledge or experience of the topic before they read the texts, modules, teacher hand-outs or systems instructions. This is a truism which is often overlooked in trade classes. And the best person to assist apprentices in gaining prior knowledge is the trade teacher. The trade teacher is the only person who possesses the knowledge of the subject. Only the trade teacher can breathe meaning into that (to the novice) awfully difficult print; those long words and difficult sentences; those heavy concepts.

If the needs of apprentices as they pursue their college courses, and the needs of industry and the consumer, are to be met and satisfied, future tradesmen must be literate in their chosen fields. In becoming literate, they will gain confidence in their abilities to make day-to-day decisions relating to their work. This is the long-term view.

In the short term, with TAFE college funds increasingly required to stretch further and further, it would be completely wrong not to help trade teachers come to an understanding of how best to assist those apprentices who are not coping, and to help them pass smoothly through their courses and gain their qualifications. This is partly an economic view, and a justifiable one. But the long-term view is more important — a view which says that all learners have the right to assistance to become fully literate, to pass their courses with dignity and increased self-confidence in their abilities.

An understanding of the problems of poor readers in technical areas requires a careful consideration of how trade language, and TAFE's mode of training, may provide barriers to comprehension for the apprentice.

The difference between narrative and technical prose

Most of the research into reading over the past few decades has been based on narrative and/or fictional prose. Relatively little attention has been given to the reading of the 'technical prose' of text books (work by B. L. Cambourne,[4] and B. L. Cambourne and R. E. Brennan,[5] being the obvious exceptions here), despite the fact that students in secondary schools, and certainly most students in TAFE colleges, are required to read technical writing. Practically all students at TAFE are dependent on technical prose.

How does technical prose differ from narrative? The technical prose of text books can be contrasted with the narrative prose of novels or short stories in a number of ways. For example, the audience for which technical prose is intended is typically a specialised audience with specific interests, needs, motivations and background experiences that relate to a particular art, profession, or domain of knowledge. On the other hand, writers of fictional and popular prose have a wider, non-specialised audience in mind. Not only are the audiences at which the different forms of prose are directed different, but the underlying purposes of each form of prose are different.

[4] B. L. Cambourne, 'The Processing of Text Book Prose: an Exploratory Study into the Silent Reading Behaviour of Readers Processing Text Book Prose', Paper presented, 4th Australian Reading Conference, Brisbane, August 1978.

[5] B. L. Cambourne & R. E. Brennan, 'The Processing of Technical Prose', University of Wollongong Research Group Committee Report, University of Wollongong, 1983.

Technical prose sets out to inform, instruct, give details — in effect, to promote learning of specific and particular matters, while non-technical prose mainly sets out to please, in a variety of ways.

As well as the audience and the purposes being different, the context and structure of the two forms of prose are also different. Non-technical prose, particularly fictional or story-type prose, usually deals with concepts and relationships that have commonly been experienced by most of the population. Not only that — there is also a structure to story-type prose that is culturally quite specific and which the majority of members of a culture know about and have expectations about. Technical prose, on the other hand, deals with concepts and relationships that are not universally experienced, or even common to most of the population. Typically, it is not intended for, nor is it aimed at, the uninitiated. Writers of technical prose (and trade teachers who use technical material in their theory classes) typically assume a shared set of experiences. They share knowledge, concepts and relationships as well as ways of thinking and talking about these experiences that can be quite specific and idiosyncratic and, to the lay reader, most difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, the call for 'back-to-basics' for those apprentices who cannot cope with technical language is usually put forward as the answer. To counter this claim, and to provide an alternative view, the point is made in the remainder of this paper that one of the hidden factors in preventing full comprehension of text by an apprentice is a lack of 'prior knowledge' of the topic.

In the trade area, the subject teacher is the most suitable person to provide that appropriate prior knowledge, in the form of excursions and hands-on activities associated with the concrete aspects of the topic. As much as possible, students talk their way to understanding before reading. They use appropriate slides, films and video tapes. Additional activities related to the subject area help give it meaning.

What is so often needed with students who are struggling is not a 'back-to-basics' pedagogy, as is so often put forward in notions which assume the apprentice to be at fault, but the building of prior knowledge about the topic. This can be provided by the person properly trained in the area. Well-informed teachers — that is, teachers who understand their students' reading problems and the reading process itself — are in a much better position to plan appropriate day-to-day teaching strategies and classroom techniques.

All readers, whether beginning or experienced, expect to gain meaning from things read. Readers use the clues presented by the print, plus their knowledge of language and likely meaning, in order to make 'guesses' about the author's intentions. Good readers are able to use their knowledge to make more and better guesses or predictions than beginning readers.

Observations of good readers, as they work at reading, have modified the former view of reading as a process whereby the reader passively reproduces the author's words. This is no longer an adequate view. The ability simply to say a word may not be reading at all. If the main purpose behind reading is comprehension, good readers are in the business of reconstructing the author's meaning.

A good reader — one who reads and understands most of what is being read — works quite hard at attempts to construct meaning; understanding does not flow one-way from the page to the reader, as is implied in TAFE's new mode of training. Comprehension is a two-way experience between the reader and the author, mediated by the text.

Reading should be seen by all teachers as a continuous process. Simply believing that it is the responsibility of the primary school reflects a 'threshold' view of reading, expressed in comments such as 'Can she read yet?' 'Do you have any non-readers?' 'Ah, thank goodness she has learnt to read at last!' Such comments suggest a basic misunderstanding: that there is a single step called 'reading'. It is easily identified when reached — 'Well, that's the end of that, we can all sigh with relief'. Many parents and teachers see reading in this episodic way. It is something you are taught when you are about six or seven.

Teachers in TAFE may hold this over-simplified notion of reading, expecting every student to cope with often difficult and demanding text books. When some students show signs of distress, they are in danger of being labelled 'in need of help' or 'backward' because they fall short of the teacher's view of a good reader. This label gains the help of a remedial teacher, and so leaves the teaching of reading to the specialists. They handle the 'non-readers' and must therefore know about the teaching of reading; classroom teachers handle the 'readers', so obviously there is no need for them to know anything about reading.

Associated with this view is usually the call for more 'basics' to be taught in the primary and secondary schools. Certainly an apprentice may receive a diet of basics in a remedial withdrawal

situation. But a 'back-to-basics' cry only serves to direct emphasis away from the real issue: the drawing together of theory and practice, and the provision of appropriate prior knowledge to allow the reader to bring experiences to the print to enable meaning to be constructed.

Lack of suitable prior knowledge of the topic may explain why many apprentices have reading difficulties in the trade area. The students most able to read with understanding are those who have access to aspects of the topic before the normally required reading and answering of set questions.

If students are to become able and independent processors of text, trade teachers need to develop standard classroom strategies to encompass teaching the concepts of their subjects through an understanding of the difficulties presented by the language of texts.

When one considers much current teaching method in trade courses, an inverse law seems to operate: the easier teaching is for teachers — that is, handing out materials — the harder it is for learners; the harder it is for teachers — that is, constructing prior knowledge — the easier it is for learners.

If the trade teacher does not understand how reading works, and hands his 'problem readers' over for withdrawal from the classroom, a great burden is placed on others (and on the text) to re-establish the context to determine meaning. In cases where compensatory education teachers have gone into the classroom to assist apprentices (in the context of meaning) a great deal of success has been reported. The trade teacher is also receiving informal in-service on the reading process.

One of the subject teachers' responsibilities in developing comprehension is to help students make a connection between prior knowledge and the ideas of any reading selection. Background discussions, raising questions and setting purposes prior to silent reading, foster comprehension. It is the trade teachers' responsibility to recognise, protect and promote this process.

One woman had completed a psychology course through Deakin University '. . . which required me to read quite a lot, and this year I'm doing computer programming'. She was also actively involved in the Drama Group, writing songs, poetry and short pieces for later production. Reading and writing provided this woman with a way of dealing with her time in prison. She said '. . . keeping yourself busy is a way to keep your mind off the time aspect of being in prison . . . I realised that within the first six months all I was doing was just living gaol and I wasn't progressing mentally . . . which meant that I wasn't progressing within myself as a person either, and you have to keep that up no matter where you are'.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.191.

One prisoner who wrote a lot of poetry and short stories maintained that he needed to improve his 'variety of presentation'. '. . . grammar I imagine would be the one big thing . . . I've got a good vocabulary but there's so many more words to use . . . So vocabulary is another area that I want to work on. But I think really variety of presentation like sentence structure, because I find it very easy to start sentences in a predictable way which is boring after you've read a page or so.'

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.25.

'Teach Me To Spell': A Dilemma

Pamela Osmond

The request from students in Adult Literacy programs for help with spelling — nothing else, just spelling — is one which, in 1985, brings conflicting ideals tugging at the professional consciences of adult literacy workers.

Tony is 23. 'I want to have another crack at spelling, then I'll try for the Army,' he tells me. Tony and I are old friends. He was one of my first adult students in our fledgling Adult Literacy program six years ago.

In those days, he wanted to join the Navy as a chef but was told he would have to 'fix up his spelling'. (Quote from my notes retrieved from a dusty file.) We worked on his spelling for some months, but he failed his entrance test anyway. He found another job that made few literacy demands on him, and eventually he stopped coming to class. He has had several jobs since, but has recently been retrenched. Now he has set his sights on the Army.

Six years ago, I enthusiastically devised the spelling program which Tony had requested. I would have felt confident that my approach would be endorsed by adult education theorists, who point towards the special need for adults to direct their own education.

Keeping in mind also that one of the premises upon which adult education is based is immediacy of application — that adult learning is undertaken to solve a problem which the adult has at the time — I based Tony's spelling program on 'Navy words' — words he would need to use in his chef's training course.

Tony was not then, and is not now, really worried about his reading. He can read enough to 'get by' and is not interested in reading, anyway. My records do not show evidence of very much reading activity. I gave him just what he asked for: a spelling program based on his needs as he stated them.

In 1985, however, I have nagging doubts about this. My doubts spring from the revolution which has occurred in writing education in recent years. Teachers who were inspired by the work of educators such as Donald Graves have moved the focus on writing from the final product to the process. We have been led to see spelling as part of the whole writing event.

We have been led to see also that by attempting to teach mastery of the surface features of writing (word lists, drills, rules) as a skill removed from the real context of writing, we have done our students a disservice. Learning to master only the surface features of the language constrains the learner. It does not encourage control of the language.

An approach to writing that is sensitive to how thoughts and feelings occur and grow has shown us the limitations of spelling programs which view writing as a service skill only. My lessons with Tony in the 'pre-writing era' required him to do little writing. It would have been clear to Tony, moreover, that I was in fact only requesting him to generate some more spelling errors on which we could work.

The writing was of course insipid, itself a mere matter of form. It lacked commitment. Not surprisingly, Tony never saw how it could be different.

Such an approach to writing stands in stark contrast to the process of growth which writers, both children and adults, engage in once they have come to view writing as a powerful tool for self-expression and self-discovery. Writers, publishers and their companions have always known this. Now teachers and their students are coming to appreciate it.

If adherence to the conventions of writing for the sake of the reader is a desirable goal, then this is the context in which these conventions are best learnt. Chrystine Bouffler, in her statement *A Whole Language Approach to Spelling*, says:

> . . . writing and spelling are language events. We learn to write and spell in the same way we learn language. We have come to view other language learning as occurring most naturally when the learner is immersed in the use of whole, real language in its rightful context.[1]

Those who become involved in real writing usually begin to write willingly and often copiously once they feel free of the constraints of getting it right the first time. Just as children have shown that many of the conventions of writing can be learned with little intervention from the teacher, so can adults also begin to discover for themselves some of the recurrent orthographic patterns of the language.

We must, however, acknowledge a difference between child

[1] Chrystine Bouffler, *A Whole Language Approach to Spelling*, RMIHE, Wagga Wagga, 1983.

learning and much of adult learning. Adult learning is characterised by a sense of urgency. The concern with immediacy of application is a real one. Tony urgently needs to know that he can adequately fill out his Army application form. If we do not help him immediately to learn to spell the words he needs, using all the tricks we may have available to us, then it is likely that he will withdraw from the program.

The question that we need to ask ourselves is this. If we only teach Tony to spell, are we really helping him to become literate or are we teaching him only to perform? Besides, how on earth do I *know* which words he needs?

Perhaps we have taken too literally the dictates of adult education conventional wisdom when we respond only to Tony's perceived and stated needs. Perhaps as adult educators we have a responsibility to help him to negotiate further goals which are related to *real* literacy.

It is the experience of Adult Literacy workers that most students resist any real engagement in writing. They have, in fact, every right to be confused when we urge them to write. Tony's past experiences of education, both at school and in his previous adult literacy class, have left him with a lasting conviction that teachers are concerned mostly with the surface features of the language. But now we have changed the rules of the game.

We have in fact changed many of the rules — not just those which relate to the place of conventional spelling and punctuation. We are, for example, no longer even concerned for him to model his writing on the styles of 'good' writers. We now get excited when he writes with his own crisp writing voice. It is no wonder that it takes adult students some time to re-learn the rules of the game, before they feel free to really begin to read and write — to become really literate.

By suggesting that we help our students to renegotiate their goals, to discover goals other than those related to their perceived and expressed needs, we may appear to leave ourselves open to the charge of engineering our students' educational goals, paying only lip-service to their need for self-direction, and not giving immediate satisfaction. In order to free ourselves of this charge, we need to refer to student testimonies concerning their experiences of adult literacy learning. Jones and Charnley, in their study of the outcomes of the British literacy campaign, found that mastery of the skills was not, in the final outcome, what students themselves valued most. Most felt that the real gain had been in confidence in themselves. The researchers suggest that 'the mark of a successful student

was a gain in confidence, without which progress in the skills would not take place'.[2] In addition, they found that many of the students who had learned to master functional literacy tasks were simply not willing to exercise these skills in a real context. It was not just a matter of not being *able* to fill in the forms. They were often not *willing* to do so.

Tony admitted that he still did not fill in his own banking forms. 'It's easier to tell the girl behind the counter what I want. Anyway, they can't read my writing.' My records of 1979 show clearly that Tony had mastered the functional skill involved in banking transactions. He did not have the confidence to use it.

How then are we to interpret Tony's request to have another go at learning to spell? In the conclusion to their study, Jones and Charnley suggest that the students who couch their appeal for help in purely technical terms are likely to be disappointed if their teachers take them at face value. The students' past experience of education has led them to view their lack of skill in literacy as the cause of their perceived incompetence.

Whilst Tony's expressed needs may be an appropriate starting point, the ultimate aim should be to help him fashion new goals which will lead him to real, reflective reading and real, reflective writing. In short, our ultimate aim should be to help Tony to become a literate person with a sense of control over his life and his language.

[2] H. A. Jones & A. H. Charnley, *Adult Literacy: A Study of its Impact*, National Institute of Adult Education, London, 1978.

Each person interviewed felt the need to be a competent reader and writer within the terms they had set for themselves. These terms were determined by a huge array of factors. The myth that there are common acceptable base levels of reading and writing has been disproved by the opinions, attitudes and expressed needs of the people interviewed. The distinction between purely 'functional literacy', the ability to deal with day to day literacy tasks, and the more expressive and creative forms of literacy has no relevance in the incarcerating context. It is ultimately 'functional' to remain sane. And literacy is the most available and controllable medium through which this can happen. Literacy preserves the integrity of individuals, offers them the chance to learn and change, and provides them with a private and reflective opportunity to explore choices and options.

Literacy and Learning — The Human Factor, p.235.

Fear, Resistance and Change in Adult Literacy Learners

Audrey N. Grant

> It's like a fear in yourself . . . I keep saying to meself 'why can't you do it, Len?' . . . an' something inside me just can't . . . There's a mental block there or something. Maybe I didn't want to learn (Len).

> I've been goin' to night school for nearly six years now. I know it's a helluva long time. Anyway, the more I progress, the slacker I get. That sounds really odd. I — I don't know whether I should tell you this or not (David).

> I can't do it . . . it just won't sink in . . . I just don't want to do it. I leave it. Then I feel guilty after . . . because I know I can't go to Bridie (the tutor) and face up to her and say 'I didn't do it'. I feel awful (Lorraine).

> I just put my pen down . . . can't go on . . . I just shut up shop. Take me tin in. I'm too highly strung, I think, too sensitive (Geoff).

> People might think it's been easy for me because I can talk about it freely. But it's not. It's ten years hard work . . . getting where I am now . . . I've stopped going (to classes) for around 18 months and I know I've slipped back. Words I knew I can't write now. It's one thing you've gotta be on all the time. Because it's part of your mind that's gone to sleep and it takes so long to wake up (Phillip).

Each of these interview comments by adult literacy students admits to an 'odd' internal resistance to literacy learning — even a deep-seated fear of progress. Expressions of their resistance to becoming literate were made by forty adult literacy students who were interviewed for two Melbourne-based research projects. Even the striking success stories serve to highlight the single-minded determination necessary to overcome such internal resistance as well as external barriers. As Prue puts it:

> It's like a baby when it takes its first steps . . . it must come from the person and . . . you must want it more than life itself . . .

What, then, are the critical factors working against literacy

learning? If we can discern these, how might the stumbling blocks be turned into building blocks for later learning? We'll attempt to consider both questions in reference to interview-based case studies of students and styles of program provision.[1]

To begin with, the clues are puzzling — often to students, teachers and researchers alike.

Our interview samples represent a reasonable cross-section of adult literacy students. None of the students interviewed lacks the intellectual ability to learn to read and write. The vast majority attended school long enough to achieve basic literacy, and remain somewhat vague or puzzled as to why they did not become literate like their peers and their siblings. As Len remarks:

> I'm learning now, so if I can learn now I might've (at school) . . . Maybe I didn't want to learn then . . . Maybe I didn't care . . . It seems strange to me that I'm the only one like it in the family. All the rest are real smart.

Lorraine, David and Geoff, three students who were very fearful of the change literacy might bring, have each made very significant progress in the eighteen months following their research interviews. Phillip and Len are good conversationalists, hold responsible jobs (having gained several trade certificates), and have been promoted to oversee a considerable number of men. And yet they continually undermine their own progress with literacy.

> I still class myself as 'illiterate' . . . it's a stigma that's stuck to you and you prob'ly never let it go . . . You see yourself as 'dumb-dumb'. One word wrong, you're still illiterate . . . busted my confidence . . . shoot me down in flames (Phillip).

Similarly, Len's self-labelling records a learned helplessness which precludes risk-taking and saps any confident predictions about making sense through reading and writing.

> I can read and write a bit now, but you can tell yourself you can't all the time, and you brainwash yourself . . . branded meself as being slow or dumb . . . But with me I've gotta be right or not at all . . . (Len).

Why do many adult literacy students, like Phillip and Len,

[1] Helen Gribble & Audrey Grant, *Adult Literacy Research Report 1982-1983*, Draft Report, Council of Adult Education, Melbourne, 1983. Forthcoming book publication, *Free to Read*.

continue to see themselves as 'illiterate' and to insist on unrealistic notions of literacy as an exact, word-perfect standard in reading, writing and spelling? 'With me I've gotta be right or not at all . . .' but 'how bad' you really are 'is a secret that you carry with you' (Len).

In the interviews, we asked students about their school and work experience, family history, concepts of self in relation to literacy, and involvement in adult literacy tuition. Where would you expect to find the origin or explanation for such resistance to constructive risk taking and literacy learning?

Not in their school experience? In fact the symptoms, rather than the origin of their literacy difficulties, are evident in the students' sense of schooling. A composite picture of typical school memories and associated literacy difficulties, evident from the student case studies, includes a pattern of broken schooling due to illness, family moves or breakups, and truancy; the stigma of regimented reading rows and reading aloud; withdrawal from regular classes, effecting a removal of the child rather than a remedy of 'the problem'; and the preference to become 'a loner' rather than suffer the jibes and ridicule of peers. In most cases, negative school memories predominate, amounting to a sense of negligence and humiliation, of no-one taking sufficient notice, of being left behind and never catching up, of meaningless 'copying' from the blackboard, of repeated violation of self-worth, and of the growing desire to avoid school and to leave at the first opportunity. However, these adults are reluctant to blame the schools, speaking rather of 'withdrawal' or 'blocking off' responses, which indicate they were not free to learn. The greatest stumbling blocks to their learning lie outside the school experience.

What is being threatened by becoming literate? Why such resistance? Overall, the case studies point to a surprising answer — that the students fear the very thing they most desire: literacy itself. To become actively and creatively literate involves radical changes to the way you relate to other people and play your part in the world, and to the degree to which you exercise personal power and responsibility. We found in the students' life stories a fundamental fear of the independence that literacy would bring, expressed both as a fear of language and a fear of becoming a changed person.

Moreover, the origins of this fear can best be understood in the students' early experience of family. Studied in depth, the personal and family histories of the students lend support to the finding that behind the failure to learn literacy at school are

unmet psychological needs, persisting from pre-school years and in most cases associated with estrangement or separation from the father, coupled with extreme mother/child dependency. The importance of the home is not surprising, for we know that learning occurs in social and cultural contexts of relationships or transactions between people. Most formatively, learning is shaped in the context of family relationships, particularly the child/parent relationship as experienced by the child. But the specific patterns are surprising. The majority of the students interviewed come from large families, with literate parents and siblings, and an unusually high rate of death or absence of the father during the child's early years. The following extracts from Danny's and Margaret's interviews are revealing of connections between family experience and resistance to literacy learning.

> I didn't want to mention it before, but *family problems* . . . Mum wasn't much of a housewife really and Dad used to always go down to the pub . . . drink his problems away . . . I bet that would be one of the main reasons . . . their family problems . . . would be in just about everyone's mind that can't read and write (Danny).

> Dad died when I was seven. I just can't remember any of me childhood. I'm the second youngest of eight. I have four brothers and three sisters, and after Dad died I just blocked everything out. I just couldn't cope at school . . . I even started to put on weight, the weight just increased, increased, increased . . . I ended up at thirty stone at my highest. I just couldn't cope at school and the weight made it even worse cause the kids torment you . . . Nothing seemed to sink in. My brothers and sisters even tried helping me at home with spelling but I just couldn't take it in . . . I just loved me Dad that much, and I just blocked everything out of me system once he was gone. I forgot what I already learnt (Margaret).

Margaret's account of her earlier life is full of 'theys' — teachers, school kids, siblings, doctors — as if 'they' ran her life, and all she could do was react. References to her excessive weight highlight her sense of having no control over what was happening, no autonomy of self; while other students may give a less dramatic picture of personal trauma, their 'blocking off' responses equally suggest an internal resistance to learning.

As Danny's and Margaret's cases imply, 'blocking off' responses to literacy learning at school are found to grow out of the child's response to traumatic relationships with parents, often involving the absence of the father at a critical time.

Phillip was four when his father died and he attributes his failure to learn to the 'withdrawal which followed that loss'. Len, the second youngest of seven, remarks 'Dad was away in the Army . . . wasn't around that much . . . and with seven kids . . . I was just another kid come along . . . Mum reared us.' Isabel's father was 'away a lot' in the Navy, and she recalls his hurtful labelling comment, 'You're a dunce'. David and Geoff both spoke of being constantly ridiculed by their fathers, including a belittling of their current attempts at literacy learning: 'You've been going so long, you ought to be able to read and spell like a professor' (David). There have been a few cases of students who are the victims of incest. The pattern of traumatic response to an absent or abusive father is documented in other studies of learning disabilities.

Ongoing, baby-like dependency on the mother, continuing well into adult life, is another pattern in the case studies, with mother and child staying very close, and interviewees apparently trapped by this dependence. Variations of this pattern of course exist — for example, that of Carmel, as a 'parentified child' chosen by her mother to stay at home and assist in the raising of eleven siblings; and of David and Geoff, idealising their mothers, living at home in their 30s, very dependent in the role of 'mother's companion', relying on her to make the decisions. There are the sons, like Phillip and David, who know they have grown up as the 'spoilt ones', choosing or being chosen from their siblings to be the one who clings close to mother. And there are those like Len, Margaret and Isabel, whose extreme dependence is expressed in their sense of being the 'neglected ones' as children, never getting enough of mother's attention and love and seeking to redress this.

> I don't think Mum had the time to really give us any love . . . She prob'ly wanted to but . . . must have been hard for her (Len).

> I didn't really know her, 'cause she was working . . . I was virtually raised by my brothers and sisters . . . and Mum was just the provider . . . just had to go out and provide everything (Margaret).

> Mum never understood children . . . I had to depend on my young sister . . . she's my leaning post (Isabel).

In short, the case studies indicate that the students' failure to achieve literacy is located in the wider context of their failure to develop as confident human beings. Fear of language or a resistance to literacy learning is associated with fear of outgrowing

dependency and with resistance to any change that threatens the whole network of dependent relationships, negotiated by the student from early childhood onwards.

So what? Some implications

The research findings discussed above have far-reaching implications for the scope and content of literacy provision. In no way can a teaching technique, method or set of skills constitute the remedy. Instead, as the following implications highlight, a much broader and deeper understanding is required of the nature of literacy learning, and what it involves.

1. Outgrowing dependencies

The usual pattern is to transfer the child/parent dependency to other relationships — for instance, relationships with a marriage partner and a literacy tutor. The life-stories of the students studied indicate a strong link between achieving basic literacy and outgrowing dependency on mother or mother-substitute. Freedom to read and write for themselves meant overcoming the dependency-related fears and ambivalence expressed, for example, in the opening quotations. Through the quality of learning support partnership offered, literacy workers can assist students to risk taking these independent steps. Related implications for tuition time, assessment and review of student needs, and ongoing self-evaluation of the provider's role as learner are discussed fully elsewhere[2].

2. A concern for the whole person

Literacy activities should be embedded in wider social contexts which cater for the student's full development as a total person. Prue's account of the change in herself traces this process:

> I have come from a person who was very, very ashamed of myself because I couldn't read or write, didn't have enough confidence in myself, wouldn't ask for any help — from a person that really hated myself inside — and have learnt to like myself and . . . won't give up.

By contrast, myths of literacy as a fixed level of mastery of word exact skills are debilitating and should not be reinforced by literacy providers.

[2] Audrey N. Grant, *Opportunity for TAFE to do Brilliantly: The Challenge of Adult Literacy Provision in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra, 1985.

3. Using oral language as a way into literacy

Many students have a whole language problem (difficulties with speaking and listening clearly, as well as with reading and writing) and require a whole-language teaching emphasis. As with young children, so with the adult — the way into literacy learning may be through greater attention to speaking and listening. For example, as the tutor recognised, Prue needed 'to tell her story . . . to unburden herself', and a language experience approach enabled this. Prue, like some of our other interviewees, discovered that in the telling, her story changed. In the context of a supportive learning-partnership and by means of the literacy process — through speaking, reading, listening and writing (drafting, revising, publishing), her story changes.

> It was good to know that that was my work . . . my story . . . and how I felt . . . to have it down on a piece of paper . . . It feels as though I wasn't a child as I was in that book, then . . . it's really good to know that I've come so far.

As Prue articulates and owns her childhood story, thinks and works through its emotional content and pain, she gains a distance and is set free to change. It is difficult to overestimate the dynamic role of talk, in the whole literacy process and in the move towards wholeness.

4. Transforming students' lives

Clearly, literacy learning is inseparable from the way we live our lives, just as the process of making sense of our experience is inseparable from our individual growth and development. According to Freire, the literacy process is a means of finding ourselves and our place in the world, of acting on and transforming the world. Margaret's interview reflection, with which we conclude, recognises this nexus between literacy and empowerment.

> You've virtually got to know how to read and write to get on in life . . . When you've got the ability to do it, your life starts to be your own, you've virtually got the freedom of doing things yourself.

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